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SUBJECT: YABLOKO PARTY LAUNCHES PARTY LIST

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Summary

¶11. (SBU) In conversations since the September 15 - 16 Yabloko congress, Yabloko federal list number two Sergey Kovalev, party member Andrey Piontovskiy, and a member of Yabloko's Murmansk delegation to the congress described to us a party whose continued stress on human rights, as manifested in the nomination of Kovalev, was a source of pride. They acknowledged that a source of frustration for many in the party was the year-in, year-out inevitability of Party Chairman Grigoriy Yavlinskiy, and attributed his continued leadership, in part, to the inability of others in the party to acquire national name recognition, given the party's limited access to the media. All interlocutors took in stride the increased factionalization of the party, especially efforts by its "Democratic Platform" to ally Yabloko more closely with Other Russia. In a post-congress meeting, Party Chairman Yavlinskiy seemed almost bored with politics, but did launch one tirade against alleged Kremlin support for Yabloko's historical rival SPS. Yabloko has compiled a long, but not strong, list for its run at the Duma, and the party appears unlikely to gather even the 4-plus percent of the votes it won in the last national legislative elections. End summary.

Party List Politics

¶12. (U) Yabloko's September 15 - 16 congress in Moscow region drew 196 delegates from around the country who spent the weekend refining the party's national list in advance of the December 2 Duma elections. The delegates reportedly spent much of the first day's closed session wrangling over the shape of their district map, and ultimately decided to field 377 candidates in 97 districts. There was reportedly much tension on day one between those delegates who worried that a small party like Yabloko would have difficulty running bona fide campaigns countrywide, and those who lobbied hard to see their district remain unmerged with neighboring districts, which would ensure a place in the sun for their region's politicians.

The Troika

¶13. (SBU) Also controversial was the composition of the party's Federal troika. Although the fate of Chairman Grigoriy Yavlinskiy was never in doubt, his management of the nomination process raised temperatures among some of the delegates. In the second day of the congress, which was open to the press, still unhappy delegates complained that the discussion of the troika had begun at 10:30 p.m. Saturday,

when many delegates were too tired to participate meaningfully. A defensive Yavlinskiy countered that, with its administrative business behind it, the later hour provided the perfect time for a calm discussion of campaign strategy and the merits of individual candidates. Proposals that debate of the troika be continued at the September 16, open, session were deflected by Yavlinskiy.

¶4. (SBU) The most controversial choice for the federal troika was former human rights figure Sergey Kovalev. Delegates at the congress told us that the choice of Kovalev, who some voters associate with defense of the behavior of the Chechen rebels and insufficient concern for Russians and Russian troops while ombudsman, might further diminish Yabloko's already very faint chances of winning at least four percent of the vote on December 2. At least two other candidates were nominated for the number two slot, Green Party Chairman Aleksey Yablokov and Federal Antimonopoly Service Chairman Igor Artemev. Both nominees withdrew their nominations; under pressure, one delegate suggested to us, from the Yabloko party leadership. In a post-congress conversation, academic and commentator Andrey Piontkovskiy described Kovalev's nomination as an important sign to that part of the electorate that values "principle over opportunism." He described Yabloko voters as "Russia's future," although he acknowledged that the future they were voting for would not arrive anytime soon. (Piontkovskiy was also reportedly considered a candidate for the troika, but could not be included as he has Georgian, as well as Russian citizenship. He took Georgian citizenship in order to show solidarity during the expulsions of Georgians from Russia in fall 2006.)

Yavlinskiy, Kovalev's
Critiques

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¶5. (SBU) Yavlinskiy's keynote speech rather defensively described Yabloko's tendency to focus on Russia's problems as a kind of patriotism. The rest of the speech was devoted to enumerating those problems, but offering few remedies for any of them. On Yavlinskiy's list were an excessive dependence on gas and oil, lack of protection for private property, the desperate need for military reform, improved relations with Russia's neighbors, the lack of rule of law and with it a lack of constraints on the powers-that-be, the yawning gap between the rich and the poor, which was producing a "divided society." The key values still to be embraced by Russia, Yavlinskiy concluded, were respect for private property, support for the efforts of small entrepreneurs, and protection for the less fortunate.

¶6. (SBU) In his turn at bat, human rights crusader and troika number two Sergey Kovalev launched a take-no-prisoners attack on the Putin government. (The congress was covered by Russian state television, which showed various outtakes on the September 16 news. None of Kovalev's remarks were broadcast.) In a subsequent conversation Kovalev, asked how he squared his participation in an electoral process administered by a regime he categorically rejected, argued uncomfortably that it was important that dissent be registered, even if it is filtered through a flawed system.

¶7. (SBU) A post-congress meeting found Chairman Yavlinskiy disinclined to discuss his party's prospects, beyond asserting that it was still possible for a rightist, liberal party to cross the seven percent threshold to the Duma. Yavlinskiy became animated only in describing alleged Kremlin support for Yabloko rival SPS. Yavlinskiy asserted that senior GOR officials had confirmed that SPS patron and RAO UES Chairman Anatoliy Chubais had received Putin's nod to tap

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as much as \$150 million in the parastatal's funds for his

party's campaign (an assertion indirectly confirmed by Putin, who told Valdai participants that Chubais had money, but needed to identify a message that would resonate with voters and overcome differences with rivals). Yavlinskiy also dismissed SPS frontman Boris Nemtsov as too dim to realize he was a puppet, SPS Deputy Chairman Leonid Gozman as "neocon for whom the end justifies the means," and SPS as little more than a protection racket for big business.

Comment

18. No one believes that Yabloko, which won only 4.3 percent of the vote in the last Duma contest; was bumped out of the March 2007 elections in St. Petersburg, one of its strongholds; and averaged about 3.5 percent in the four March regional elections where it remained on the ballot, can find its way into the Duma this time around. Some believe that the party's, and Yavlinskiy's reappearance on national television means Kremlin support, which could produce a mathematical miracle on election day. Kovalev, Yavlinskiy, and Piontkovskiy disagreed, and saw the coverage as gauged to create interest in the election among the electorate and allow the election managers to argue that they are being evenhanded in their treatment of the parties without giving Yabloko the coverage it would need to compete with the liked of United Russia. The continued, fragmented state of the liberal-leaning opposition, and its inability to find a message that would resonate with voters also plays a role in the diminished prospects of Yabloko, SPS, and the other western-leaning parties in Russia.

Russell